

The Transparent Society

CIS/CSE 583



Source

David Brin, *The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?*, Addison-Wesley, 1998, ISBN 0-201-32802-X.



Postulate

- The future will head in one of two directions
- Let's describe them as two cities
- Both have wonderful technology, especially communications and media
- Both have a typical amount of urban problems
- Typical issues of environment, education, etc.
- What makes them really different from today?
No street crime. Why? Cameras.



Cameras

- Mounted on every traffic light, street sign, and rooftop.
- Mobile cameras in wristwatches, cell phones, etc.
- Essentially all public life is observed



The Difference Between the Cities: City #1

- Cameras report directly to the central Police station
- Security officers scan data stream for lawbreaking
- Citizens guard every word and action, knowing that “Big Brother” is watching
- No public access to information, implies lack of accountability



The Difference Between the Cities: City #2

- Cameras report to public networks
 - Safety: finding lost children, virtually peering around the next corner at night, law enforcement
 - Oversight: watching the watchmen
 - Convenience: checking on appointments.
- No indoor cameras, except in Police HQ



Tenet

- We cannot stop the cameras.
- Outlawing or restricting access to technology only means that the government, the rich, and criminals have access to it.
- Which city would you rather live in?



The First Experiment, and Others

- Town of King's Lynn, in Britain
- 60 cameras scanning known "trouble spots," direct feed to police HQ
- Crime dropped by a factor of 70 (not 70%!)
- Glasgow, Scotland followed suit (68% drop)
- Newcastle, UK identified 1,500 criminals with taped evidence; all but 7 pleaded guilty.
- Cameras at major sporting events used with face recognition software
- Baltimore, New York, ...



The Technology

- The Nannycam in "Meet the Parents" was not fiction
- Cameras smaller than a sugar cube
- Complete setup $\frac{1}{2}$ the size of a pack of cigarettes
- Sound pickups as well (use triangulation to locate gunfire, etc.)
 - But what about eavesdropping?



The Technology II

- Night vision goggles available to anyone with the \$ (less than a video camera)
- Infrared sensors (AGEMA Systems of ... Syracuse!) can detect marijuana cultivators or people moving around (cf. the movie "Eraser")
- Pilotless drones used by the military (cf. commercial during the AFA/ND game) will be sold to civilians (no law against it, as they're weaponless)



Signal Tracking & Databases

- It's easy to locate a cell phone user
 - Required to be built into cell phones to aid 911 calls now
 - *Killing Pablo* by Mark Bowden (same author as *Black Hawk Down*)
- What about your record of
 - Travel on the interstate
 - Purchase of medication



An Alternative View of City #1

- John and Jane Doe don't think about the cameras
 - The government doesn't publicize them
 - Or says they're only for use against criminals
 - They've been shrunken so small as to be invisible
- The suffer from the illusion they have privacy
- But those in City #2 know better
- We don't have privacy today, and haven't for 40 years



Morality

- The technology itself isn't good or bad, it's just there
- Our use of it will determine its morality



Troubling Questions in Either City

- Which citizens (convicted felons?) should be denied access to the cameras?
- As face recognition gets better, will anyone ever again have anonymity in a crowd?
- When should cameras be allowed indoors?
- How will we prevent abuses of these abilities?



Observation #1

- "In all of history, we have found just one cure for error—a partial antidote against making and repeating grand, foolish mistakes, a remedy against self-deception. That antidote is criticism."
- This is the basis of the Scientific Method
- Capitalism
- Evolution



Observation #2

- “Alas criticism has always been what human beings, especially leaders, most hate to hear.”
- This leads to a natural tendency to suppress dissent
- Accountability is the key to long-term success



A Central Paradox

- “Whenever a conflict arises between privacy and accountability, people demand the former for themselves and the latter for everyone else.”
- After all, I can be trusted. The rest of you I’m not so sure about.



The Fundamental Questions

“Can we stand living exposed to scrutiny, our secrets laid open, if in return we get flashlights of our own that we can shine on anyone who might do us harm—even the arrogant and strong?”

Or is an illusion of privacy worth any price, even the cost of surrendering our own right to pierce the schemes of the powerful?”



Historical Perspective

- Freedom has not been the default state
- The values we take for granted (human rights, egalitarian treatment) have only been seen in a tiny minority of societies
- Controlling the flow of information has always been the tool of the despot



A Recurring Theme

- Party (or group) A contends that another group C is inherently dangerous, and that its potential to do harm is amplified by secrecy. Therefore, accountability must be forced upon that group through increased information flow.
- Party or group B (which may be C) argues that some vital good will be threatened by heightened candor, and wants to shut down the proposed data flow.



Examples

- Megan's Law
 - A is the federal legislature
 - B is the ACLU, et al.
 - C comprises sexual offenders
- The Clipper Chip
 - A is the FBI
 - B is the EFF, EPIC, etc.
 - C depends on who you are talking to


